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Furor on Secrecy Owes Lot to Nixon

THE CLAMOR over secrecy in government and the revelation of leaked documents owes a lot to the man in the White House. Except for carefully stage-managed television performances, communication with the media has fallen close to zero.

In 1971 the President had nine press conferences, and four of these were of the impromptu kind held on short notice where only the White House regulars are present. This is a measure of his distrust of a direct confrontation with reporters. He shies away from even the kind of East Room press conference that has increasingly become a television spectacular with the seats in the front row allotted to those who are familiars.

Suppose in the immediate issue of the India-Pakistan dispute that Mr. Nixon had held a press conference in the first week in December. He would have been asked about his attitude on the developing war.

How much better to have given a forthright answer deploring what the White House considered India's aggression than to have this leak out of a secret session of policy makers. The President could not in any event escape responsibility for the decision.

In 1970 the President had four full-scale press conferences and one impromptu. The total for 1969 was eight. Television interviews with network reporters have filled some gaps. But they are no substitute for the give-and-take of the press conference that not so long ago was both a principal source of news and a mirror of the man in the Chief Executive's chair.

COMPARISON with the past is instructive. Mr. Nixon's only Republican predecessor in recent history, Dwight D. Eisenhower, could never have been accused of loving the press and seeking [illegible]. Pressed hard by his inquisitors, his flushed face would reflect his intense irritation. Yet in his eight years in office he held 193 press conferences. An average of 24 per year is not bad for a President who took frequent vacations and in 1955 had a long enforced quiet with a heart attack.

In his nearly three years in the White House John F. Kennedy had 64 press conferences. In the State Department auditorium taking the questions as they came from every side, he developed a mastery of challenge and response. The complaint was that his was a virtuoso performance with the emphasis on theatrics. Yet it often produced important news with a Kennedy flair, as when the President in a somber mood, the negotiations over the nuclear test ban treaty faltering, spoke of the genie escaping forever from the bottle of control.

In his six years Lyndon B. Johnson held 126 press conferences. Many on the impromptu order. Suffering from comparison with the Kennedy virtuosity, he varied the rate from year to year.

THE VALUE of the White House press conference as an institution was exaggerated in the past. Comparison with the question hour in the British House of Commons will not stand up. In the Commons, the Prime Minister and his cabinet are subjected to a sharp give-and-take on the issues of the day.

At the White House press conference a reporter can rarely have a followup question when the first response has been evasive.

Even in the era of FDR, who tried to keep to a twice-a-week conference schedule, the followup was rare. Once a reporter pressed for a further response, the President replied with "Remember, no cross examination."

But for all its limitations, the press conference has been the only [illegible] confrontation with a Chief Executive increasingly hedged around with an apparatus of power and secrecy. As a rare television show, a limit of half an hour in itself a serious handicap, it no longer has much value as a forum shedding enlightenment on the ways of government.

One handicap is the size of the press corps accredited to the White House. Some means can surely be found, however, to divide the corps at separate conferences. Both for public confidence and for the conscience of the President the right of public inquiry is a vital part of a democratic system.